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Humour and the Unacceptable in Neil Hamburger's Routine

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The 'sick' humour of Australian born US comedian Gregg Turkington's alter-ego, 'Neil Hamburger,' invites us to ask questions about the meaning of offensive humour as an instance of the unacceptable. Hamburger invites us to 'stop and think,' in Lockyer and Pickering's phrase (2011: 12), about why we are unable to laugh at some things and about whether we ought to or not. How and when humour becomes offensive has become an important topic in contemporary humour studies.¹ Neil Hamburger's standup routine is an interesting instance of humour that borders on offence not just because of the 'sick' elements in his jokes but also because of his parody of standup comedy itself. It is purposeful but risks the possibility of not being funny. Notwithstanding the context of the comedy club—where jokes that push the limit are expected—anyone who gets up on an American stage to joke about God not being able to create tits because he is gay is likely to risk offence, and of course, the 'joke' not being experienced as funny. The unseemliness of Hamburger's stage persona helps him get away with it but Hamburger does provoke wildly divergent reactions, from gleeful approval to moral outrage and (or) boredom. One reviewer from the Guardian, Brian Logan, described him as a 'so-bad-he's-still-bad anti-comedian' and stated of a particular performance in Edinburgh that 'if we laugh—and I did—we're doing so at the intemperance of his hatred, and at his assumption that we'll share it' (Logan 2010: para. 1, 2). Why does Neil Hamburger

¹ See, for instance: Palmer (1994: 161–172), Billig (2005), Hall & Sereno (2010), Pickering & Lockyer (2005), and Davies (2011).

tell the kind of jokes that genuinely risk not being funny? What is his purpose in deliberately going so close to many bones? In short, how does offence play into his politics?

Understanding Hamburger's purposes and politics offers an important contribution to the scholarly discussion of offensive humour because it draws attention to problems raised by some recent theories within humour studies, offered as an explanation of what happens when humour becomes offensive. The work of Palmer (1994) and Billig (2005) in particular offer discussions of the social and subjective thresholds between humour and offence. Palmer emphasizes the role of occasion as affecting the social psychology of humour. He demonstrates convincingly that occasion can affect whether a joke in a given instance becomes established as a joke: for example, bottom-pinching in a pub environment can and has been defended as a joke even when 'one person's humour [wa]s another person's offensiveness' (1994: 167–168). The role of occasion is an important acknowledgement. The comedy club context of many, though not all, of Hamburger's performances allows him significant license. Despite that, though, he can still offend. Furthermore, if occasion has an influence, one might still ask what occasion does actually at the psychological level in having that influence. How exactly does a pub environment make a person able to justify an act of bottom-pinching as a joke when they might not elsewhere? What effect does environment have—emotionally, morally—on the mind?

Billig's more recent discussion of humour and laughter as ridicule (2005) helpfully reminds us of the extent to which a moral vision underlies most forms of humour. Billig analyzes the disciplinary functions of humour and laughter, which reinforce the values constituting the social order by exposing contradictions of them to ridicule. Billig acknowledges the category of 'rebellious humour' (2005: 207–214), which would seem to be something else than disciplinary. However, he goes on to point out ways in which rebellious humour can be disciplinary too; that is, such humour simply functions to support the prevailing social order (2005: 211–212). Another important example is the more widely recognized disciplinary function of fools and folly in the Middle Ages.² To some extent Billig's focus on the disciplinary power of humour and its conservatism

² Billig (2005: 212–213) quotes Zijderveld (1982: 28). See also Ghose (2008: 63–65) on historiographical problems to do with Bakhtin's argument about folly as transgressive.

draws on the work of Mulkay who argued influentially that humour's existence as a 'non-serious' mode of discourse makes it fundamentally derivative of politics in the serious realm, and thus ultimately powerless because it cannot intervene independently. When humour is powerful, it is because it reflects politics that are already at play in the 'serious realm' (Mulkay 1988: 197–219). However, a derivative or a disciplinary account of the 'power' of humour leaves little by which to distinguish between conservative disciplinary humour that attacks contradictions of the social order's values and humour that is truly rebellious. That is to say, defining humour largely in terms of socially disciplinary ridicule or something derivative of serious politics means reducing revolutionary humour to the pleasure of rebellion or to impotent fun. And yet, if humour is a rhetorical tool, as Billig says (2005: 189), what is it that changes when humorous ridicule becomes rebellious as it lights upon a fresh sense of what is at fault in the social order, such as when Hamburger invites his audience to see the meaninglessness (from his point of view) of the categories of celebrity and the sacred? Shared laughter is a social force, but it is also a shared moral vision, and thus a mental phenomenon as much as a social one.

Here I want to revisit Aristotle's comments in the *Poetics* on the risible in order to bring out the psychological elements of humour implicit in those comments; this will be of use in analyzing Hamburger's routine because they point to both the shared moral vision in rebellious humour as well as the subjective thresholds beyond which humour becomes pain or offence. Aristotle's comments on the subjects of comedy and the risible are usually just put together with those of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1689), as an example of 'superiority theory.'³ However, Aristotelian thinking on the subject can evoke more than that. The comments in his *Poetics* do not amount to a theory of comedy, as is well known; the book primarily discussed tragedy. However, in the context of a short discussion of theatrical comedy, Aristotle spoke evocatively though ambiguously of the laughable as a species of the ugly or disgraceful. The laughable, he suggests, is 'constituted by a fault and a mark of shame (*aischros*), but lacking in pain or destruction' (1987: 36). For this reason, Aristotle describes the genre of theatrical comedy as that which imitates people and behaviours that violate values held to be

³ For examples, see Monro (1951: 83) and Morreall (1983: 4–6). In more recent discussions, Critchley (2002), Billig (2005: 43–45) and Martin (2007: 44) do not question seriously the ascription of 'superiority theorist' to Aristotle.

normative (1987: 33). Yet while the laughable focuses on a (moral) fault, the emotion of humour it generates does not need to be seen as a stance of superiority. The level of sympathy that a person experiencing humour has toward the ‘faults’ of others will depend, among other things, on the extent to which he or she also shares such a fault. Laughing at the mistakes of another does not preclude simultaneous recognition of the same mistakes in oneself. Neil Hamburger’s routine, for instance, affects more than just an attitude of superiority in the audience towards his ‘ugly’ stage persona, or within that persona towards the celebrities he jokes about. Hamburger is capable of developing more sympathy for his antics and his attitude to celebrity and the sacred than one would expect at first. Though as will become increasingly clear, not everybody ‘gets it.’

The laughable, for Aristotle, is a particular species of fault/shame/ugliness (*aischros*) and its particular feature is that it does not involve pain or destruction. Yet ‘lacking in pain or destruction’ involves a considerable ambiguity. Does Aristotle mean ‘lacking in pain or destruction’ for the person being laughed at? That would mean he is prescribing a threshold beyond which a person or thing should not be mocked: that is, up to the point at which they truly suffer. Or, does Aristotle mean ‘lacking in pain or destruction’ for the person laughing? In that case, he is empirically describing a psychological threshold in the experience of humour, whereby a given subjectivity cannot experience amusement if it hits too close to home, because that is the point at which emotional experience moves from humour to horror. We do not need to decide for one over the other. As Halliwell’s commentary notes, both interpretations are possible (1987: 85). However, I wish to exploit that latter possibility—that there is a subjective threshold marking the scope of humour—as a way of engaging with offence and the unacceptable at the level of subjectivity, or individual psychological experience. The threshold I am interested in is that familiar point of mental recognition, which says: ‘maybe I should not be laughing at this.’ It is a question that Hamburger’s performances evoke.

Aristotle’s comments offer us not just the idea that a critical and thus moral or evaluative stance lies behind the psychology of the laughable, or the unseemly. They suggest also that, because of the critical stance it implies, when people share humour they share a specific moral vision, that is to say, a set of beliefs about how things ought to be or ought not to be. For there to be an unseemly—free of pain and destruction—there needs to be a seemly. Christie Davies’s recent book *Jokes and Targets* discusses

lawyer jokes targeting excessive counter-litigation that originate in America but were emailed around and enjoyed by British lawyers (2011: 187–188). While Davies focuses on the shift between the American joke as a joke about ‘us’ that becomes, in the British context, a joke about ‘them,’ about ‘those American lawyers who go in for that sort of thing’ (2011: 188), the British lawyers were able to enter into a similar moral vision focusing on the ‘unseemliness’ of concatenated counter lawsuits. This is an instance of shared moral vision. On the other side of the coin, we might say that when people cannot share a joke, and the line is crossed by humour so that it becomes offensive, there is a breakdown of shared moral vision because other horizons of moral thinking come into play.

The idea that a moral vision is central to sharing humour gives us a way of describing the difference between ‘disciplinary’ and ‘rebellious’ humour as more than just the social difference between mocking the powerless and mocking the powerful (Billig 2005: 208). Rebellious humour is not necessarily just that of the humour shared by the powerless at the expense of the powerful, although it can be described that way. It is better to think of rebellious humour as an alternative moral vision that people can share or not share, find funny or not find funny. If humour requires a shared moral vision to be successful, then from this point of view, one of the reasons why people struggle with whether Hamburger is funny or not is because his jokes move towards a moral vision that seeks to disable our tendency to expect celebrity and the sacred to be meaningful categories. The ubiquitous mockery of celebrity in popular culture and mockery of the sacred assumes the expectation that those categories are meaningful. When celebrities do not live up to the behaviour we might expect of public figures and role models, there is a laughable unseemliness to be shared. If Hamburger were merely attacking that conventional form of unseemliness, such as sexual foibles, conspicuous substance abuse, and endless marriages and divorces, and if therefore he were merely supporting conventional beliefs about how celebrity lives ought to be better, his ‘humour’ would not be the challenge it is, nor would it risk the offence it does.

Of course, this moral antagonism toward the ‘meaningfulness’ of the categories of sacred and secular is not a completely unique vision of the world. A great deal of more sophisticated comedy is devoted to mocking the pretensions of celebrities who act as if their mere celebrity makes them important, thus rendering mere celebrity meaningless.

The moral vision underlying this is that celebrities ought to be in touch with the fact that celebrity itself is not a significant human achievement. When they are not, their behaviour can be very funny when a comedian draws attention to that contradiction. Hamburger's moral vision is in the same ballpark. His means of deconstruction, however, is relatively unique. Not only do his sick jokes push the limit of comic potential by risking people not even finding the jokes funny, but Hamburger groans at his own jokes as if they were bad ones, almost confirming the audience's confusion. The groans implicitly ask the audience to be complicit in the mockery of the joke even as it is being told and 'enjoyed.' This has the effect not only of evacuating the categories of celebrity and sacred of any meaning but also of softening the intensity even of the moral vision that questions celebrity-behaviour. This in itself is potentially amusing because comedy shows are expected to be funny and Hamburger makes a mockery of his own funniness. In doing so he is often very funny.

Aristotle's comment about humour being a fault that does not cause pain, also suggests, as I have said, a subjective (and when shared, social) threshold beyond which humour becomes horror, and the merely unseemly becomes the abominable as the comic situation or joke cuts too close to the bone. I am therefore using the English word 'unseemly' to describe that which people are able to find funny because the particular moral compromise remains, in Aristotle's words, 'free from pain and destruction.' Within this Aristotelian framework there is a continuum of moral compromise moving away from moral foibles or contradictions of values and expectations that are not particularly threatening and are therefore funny and towards that which causes moral outrage and vicarious (or otherwise) pain. Any given person will experience a particular joke (a joke targeting some form of unseemliness) in a slightly different place on the continuum. That relativity describes what happens when some people are offended by a joke and others are delighted. Getting too close to the bone means getting too close to that less amusing and deeply problematic terrain, which cannot be described as merely unseemly anymore and is unlikely to be experienced as funny. For instance, a joke about a certain form of sexual unseemliness might evoke in one person painful memories that make the joke offensive or not funny and yet be immensely amusing to another because the distance from any such memories makes the critique of the joke remain merely unseemly. At the level of socially negotiated moral vision, it can be unacceptable to laugh at or find certain things merely unseemly and thus amusing, given

the sheer gravity of the pain and (or) destruction those topics involve; the holocaust and its survivors is an obvious example. Sufficient personal or socially negotiated distance has to exist from any kind of confronting horror for things to be laughable. It is sometimes difficult to know where the dividing line is. Most of us have been confronted with the experience of simultaneously laughing at something and asking ourselves whether we really ought to be laughing. Speaking of a subjective and social threshold between the unseemly (funny) and the morally abominable (unacceptable) gives us a way of understanding what is going on in that confusing scenario.

‘Distance’ from pain or destruction is therefore a key element in an Aristotelian psychology of humour. Hamburger carefully stays on the acceptably decorous side of the threshold when joking for instance that God invented Domino’s Pizza to punish humanity for its complacency in letting the holocaust happen. There he maintains a certain distance from the holocaust itself—and from the threshold where things might become unacceptable or deeply offensive—by joking only with reference to the holocaust and making Domino’s Pizza and his caricature of God the butt, target, or unseemly *aischros* of his intense critical focus. Palmer’s discussion of cruel or sadistic humour presents the idea that the SS officer in *Sophie’s Choice* (Styron 1979) is a kind of joke in the context of his own subjectivity (1994: 170–171). The idea of distance helps to address how that works. Where anyone else looking on might think of the choice he presents to Sophie and its perverse quotation of Christ’s words ‘Suffer little children to come unto me’ as unspeakable abomination, the SS officer sees the whole situation as merely unseemly for a whole range of reasons. What is different? The difference is that the SS officer’s ideological context and its debasement of empathy distances him from the suffering and pain that anyone else might feel immediately, even with the imagination. Lockyer and Pickering begin their book on the limits of humour with Silvio Berlusconi’s unfortunate suggestion, when opening his term as president of the European Parliament, that German member of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, could play the part of a guard in a film about Nazi concentration camps (2005: 1). The ‘joke’ was a disaster and Berlusconi defended himself by saying that Italians knew how to laugh at these kinds of tragedies. Clearly, Berlusconi assumed a distance when there was not one. To return to Palmer’s concern with occasion as it influences the psychology of humour (1994: 11–40), I would suggest that part of that influence is the way an occasion either distances people from their particular complex of memories that

cause pain, sufficiently for jokes to be effective, or otherwise, fails to maintain that distance, leading to offence or simply a lack of funniness. The amount of people who are able to stay on the lighter side of the threshold between painless unseemliness and painful offensiveness will shape the extent to which an occasion is humorous. The threshold is negotiated differently for each person but only two people need to share the moral vision of a joke and stay on the humorous side of the threshold for humour to be said to exist, as distinct from mere laughter induced by the fact that others are laughing. Neil Hamburger uses the fact that the comedy club context licenses boundary-pushing to try something unique. After setting himself up as a buffoon, so that the audience can always laugh conservatively at him, he deliberately violates those thresholds to bring people closer toward his own moral vision.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that those who ‘carry humour to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons, striving after humour at all costs’ (Aristotle 1984: 1780, IV.8). It was possible to enjoy unseemliness to such an extent that you became unseemly and thus laughable yourself. Aristotle’s Roman commentators agreed. For Cicero—the iconic orator and rhetorical theorist—too, mimicry of another’s unseemly behavior was usually laughable; when it went too far, the mimic turned himself into a buffoon and was unbecoming. It was better by far, in Cicero’s senatorial culture, to stay on the seemly side of mimicry so that your hearers would have to imagine the unseemliness you pointed to (Cicero 2001: 373–379). Such circumscriptions were not arbitrarily prescribed. They derived from the important considerations of public honour in Greek and Roman civilization and a persuasiveness in court that depended on being held in honour. However, when the very well-dressed but bedraggled figure of Neil Hamburger arrives on stage, coughing violently in a confused manner and spilling multiple glasses of vodka all over himself, his very starting point is a deliberate violation of this threshold of decorum. In this way, Hamburger announces himself not as an amused comedian in a moral community with the audience—unless of course they are already die-hard fans—but as a buffoon almost out of control of his own bodily movements. He makes himself laughable, evoking an entirely conservative reaction. To this extent, Hamburger the stage persona stands in a long line of classic fools or buffoon figures, who push the limits either to express outrage, to be critical, and sometimes even just to reinforce the political status quo by being deliberately unseemly. Some obvious examples are Shakespeare’s character Falstaff in the *Henry IV* plays and the fool in

King Lear, as well as the various incarnations of Harlequin in the *Commedia dell'arte* and Carlo Goldoni's farce. Even though each of those famous fool figures will often reinforce norms by focusing critical laughter on their violation, each is also capable of radical deconstruction, of pushing the boundaries of decorum to such an extent that they risk punishment from the existing social order, and sometimes even shift the moral critical focus off themselves and onto other targets that emerge slowly. Hamburger combines different types of comic fool. He is the ridiculous self-deprecator as well as the facetious wag always making a joke—yet with a twist; Hamburger groans at the lameness of his own jokes and projects an air of having no enjoyment in their telling. The image of inept comedian is particularly important in the structure of Hamburger's routine. This can make it incredible that he manages to be so engaging—and prompts us to ask how any moral community develops at all around his comic targets.

I would now like to discuss in detail a particular performance by Hamburger that was recorded in Sydney in 2006.⁴ The DVD captures much of what Neil Hamburger's routine regularly involves. The performance, as recorded, runs for around 47 minutes. The show begins slowly. A nonplussed Hamburger walks on stage in his customary tuxedo, drinks nestled under his right arm, and fusses over the microphone while coughing violently into it in a fit of catarrh. He doesn't speak a word for over forty seconds. The first words—which attempt to ask how everybody is doing—are interrupted by his having dropped a glass. The first 'lets get this party started' precedes a self-introduction as 'Neil Hamburger,' and is then repeated five times, each time, apparently, delayed by coughing fits or having dropped another glass. In the process of picking them up, he spills the other drinks under his arm all over himself. The first 'joke,' or even coherent sentence isn't offered until 4:08. Hamburger is announcing himself as an unseemly clown, as something to be laughed at. Indeed the audience seems to find his bumbling very amusing. While it is inappropriate and problematic to make assumptions about the emotions of people in the audience merely from the sounds they make, it is reasonable to make meaningful distinctions between laugh-out-loud moments, tentative giggling, and groaning, as far as the intensity of funniness they suggest. When he drops a glass for the first time, the audience laughs loudly. However, throughout this introduction the audience reacts primarily with confused giggling.

⁴ The performance was given at the old Newtown RSL club, Newtown, Sydney, Australia. A DVD was later released under the title *Neil Hamburger: The World's Funnyman* (Hamburger 2006). In quoting from this performance, I will refer to the time markers from the DVD.

Hamburger's very buffoonishness seems therefore to hover somewhere between the laughable and the lame. As a buffoon, he encourages the audience to be amused at his very act of attempting to ask joke questions, precisely because it is a buffoon who is asking.

Accordingly, Hamburger usually asks his questions very slowly, emphasizing certain words with unseemly potential. I will indicate his emphasis with italics. The first joke, for instance, runs as follows, 'wha'd'ya call a *senior citizen*, who can't refrain from exposing their *genitalia* in public?—Madonna' (4:08). Loud laughs follow. The joke is obviously at Madonna's expense, but it targets, more generally, the extravagance of popular performance by describing it unexpectedly in terms of something typically taken to be unseemly: senior citizens exposing their genitals. Of course, Hamburger's own performance relies on the unseemliness of outlandish extravagance. The first joke initiates two things. First, it points to a consistent interest in famous and extremely popular celebrities and in deflating or questioning our expectation that celebrity and sacred are meaningful categories. Second, it inter-connects Hamburger's own unseemliness with that of the celebrities his jokes attack. The presence of his own unseemly buffoonishness, as the jokes keep coming, is an important part of his being able to make people laugh at their telling, as I hope to show. Leo Benedictus suggests that 'for most comedians, the path of so-bad-it's-good is a dead end ... not Neil Hamburger' (Benedictus 2012: para. 1). There is a continual interplay between the unseemliness of his character on stage, as it seeks to evoke laughter and sympathy, and that of the people and behaviors ridiculed in his jokes.

The jokes come approximately every 30 to 40 seconds, and are often about the same person so that an attack builds around a single celebrity and their particular fault. Often these groups of jokes have a degenerating pattern, starting from humorous unseemliness violating a typical moral norm and progressing toward the viscerally distasteful, which can be less obviously funny than earlier jokes to the extent that they are focused on a less obvious form of unseemliness or else something pushing the audience beyond the thresholds between the unseemly/disturbing and decorum/indecorum. For example, Hamburger follows up his first joke about Madonna with the following: 'why did *Madonna* feed her infant *baby*, *dog* food?—well she had no choice, that's just what came out of her breasts!' (4:31).

Most of the jokes are structured around a relatively obvious unseemliness that violates a relatively common norm. Of the following two examples, the first has more potential for offence but both derive from obvious moral norms. Between 6:40 and 11:39 Hamburger gives his audience five Michael Jackson jokes in a row that draw on the potential of the topic of pedophilia to hover between being experienced as something merely unseemly and as a moral outrage. One, for example, is the following. ‘wha’d’ya call five fingers that are grasping a small boy’s penis? —the *Jackson five*!’ (6:40). The topic is pedophilia but the punning word play maintains distance by displacing moral disgust with unseemly surprise. Another joke, however, elicits more groans: ‘Why did Michael Jackson put *chocolate sauce* on his *hotdog*?—well, so that his *children* would eat it!’ (9:00). Since pedophilia is a serious moral issue, the joke can remain on the unseemly (and thus laughable) side of the subjective threshold only if Hamburger can maintain sufficient distance from that seriousness by linking the joke with such an easy target as Michael Jackson. If anyone in the audience knew Michael Jackson, or had children affected in such a way, we might imagine that the comic distance would be disabled by default and the threshold immediately crossed. A second example of an obvious moral norm is at 11:39, where Hamburger asks, ‘why did al-Qaida burn in Kabul 10,000 copies of Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon* album?—well, because it’s a terrible album.’ There’s a surprise element here but the joke is structured around an implicit critique of the typical unseemliness (from a US point of view) of al-Qaida’s willingness to attack anything Western, even something so seemingly innocuous as a record, as well as a critique of the craziness of popular status. The first of those forms of unseemliness—al-Qaida’s anti-Americanism—is obviously not a difficult sentiment to share with a western audience. The joke relies on completely normative western values, because, from that point of view, the idea that a symbol of western culture is something to be threatened by seems absurd.

Most of the jokes that push the boundaries have a certain level of normative unseemliness too. Those between 13:40 and 20:00 on Courtney Love target the unseemliness of her heroin addiction and trash aesthetic. Those about Paris Hilton at 5:15 and 25:10 attack the supposed absurdity of scripted self-exposure through sex-tape ‘scandals.’ Those involving Ronald MacDonald, KFC, and Dominos Pizza revolve around the idea that fast food is somehow dehumanizing. None of those things are *inherently* unseemly. They are made so by normative cultural beliefs, which are

common enough to be basis of jokes that people will find funny. Again, distance, is particularly important. The jokes about addiction, pedophilia, domestic violence, for example, keep their distance from painful realities by being connected, mostly at least, with cartoonish celebrities.

But Neil Hamburger's routine pushes well beyond predictable critiques of unseemliness defined around normative moral beliefs. That is perhaps why his act stands on a knife-edge between laughter on the one side, and groaning and potential offence on the other. At least three of his jokes surely had the potential to take at least some members of the audience to the brink of this threshold, given the evidence of written reviews from other performances that I have cited. For example, 'why did Sir Mick Jagger urinate on his own daughter?—he mistook her for a fan!' (21:15). Or, 'why did God send Terri Schiavo to hell?—for the *sin* of *sloth*!' (23:39). Or again, 'why did Kevin Federline spray disinfectant on Brittany Spears's caesarian section wound?—well so it would be safe for fucking!' (38:33). Given the demonstrable admixture of groans and slow guffaws, such jokes surely had the potential to challenge some in the audience as to whether they should be laughing at them at all. Hamburger is stepping across the subjective and social thresholds here, encouraging the audience to laugh dissonantly, as if from that less amusing side. Hamburger's own groans immediately after making such jokes, as much as they construct his own lameness, suggest his own sympathy with the difficulty of finding the jokes amusing. How is it, then, that such questions and answers—on topics related to extreme dehumanization, or, in case of Schiavo, an intensely irreverent caricature of the sacred and an extreme insensitivity to a real human tragedy—can be entertained as jokes simply because it is Neil Hamburger who said them? Where does the distance come from?

For one thing, Neil Hamburger's character invites amused loathing by being pathetic and thus highly unseemly, which shapes his audience's view of the jokes. For the character to work and the 'jokes' to be recognized as jokes—by being unseemly jokes not normal jokes, and thus laughably linked to Hamburger's own character—he must continually maintain his own character as disgusting buffoon to promote amusement and pity that stops short of outright anger. His character is a pathetic washed up old comedian who cannot even do his job without the comfort of multiple glasses of vodka under his arm and without whining in self-hatred at the lameness of his own gags. Part

of what makes the horrible ‘jokes’ about dehumanization and the brutal insensitivity to a human tragedy like Schiavo’s possible as jokes, and even quite amusing, is that there is a fittingness to their having coming from the mouth of this buffoonish character. Imagine how much different—and possibly non-existent—the humour would be if such jokes had been told by Jerry Seinfeld, since Seinfeld cannot rely on being a buffoon in order to maintain distance. From that point of view, the jokes are absorbed into the character of Neil Hamburger. Laughing at them partly means laughing at him – so that the amusement (and its critical focus) is not just directed at Terri Schiavo or the unreasonable complacency of Hamburger’s God but at the fact that *a* comedian had the audacity and self-disregard to get up on stage and say them.

Of course, not everyone can respond to the character that way. If an audience cannot appreciate the unseemliness of Neil Hamburger as a slightly loveable but mostly pathetic buffoon, then the ‘jokes’ can seem stiff and pointless too. David Whitehouse describes a performance of Hamburger’s at the Hammersmith Apollo during a tour of the UK by the band Tenacious D, in which he performed first as a support act. The audience of Tenacious D fans, ‘a confused cauldron of hormonal soup,’ is not happy. Two minutes into the set,

the place rings with booing and the dull thud of coins hitting the curtain behind Neil’s head. “D! D! D! D!” they scream in the hope that it might speed up the arrival of the band. Neil loses his temper. “Jack Black has given me his personal permission to tell another four jokes every time you shout ‘D!,’ you pointless cocksuckers,” he rants. The crowd go silent. (Whitehouse 2007: para. 1, 14–15)

Of the coins, Whitehouse reports Neil Hamburger’s comments when the latter turns up at his house: ““These,” Neil explains, “are what the people of Britain have thrown at me so far”. He’s been averaging £20 a night (which in shrapnel isn’t bad going)’ (2007: para. 9). The unappreciative audiences saw neither Hamburger nor his jokes as unseemly and therefore funny, only as pathetic and stupid. The threshold was crossed for a different reason. When an audience member becomes frustrated at Hamburger and his jokes because they fail to see him as a buffoon who is ‘in on the joke,’ and take him rather as just an incomprehensible abomination, it can be even funnier for the audience members who do understand. The very unseemliness of the inability to ‘get it,’ especially in the comedy club performances where the occasion encourages humour, explains to a large degree why that is so.

The barely amused loathing of Hamburger and his jokes is an entirely conservative reaction on the part of those who do not quite ‘get it’ and yet, aside from merely evoking disgust, Hamburger can evoke pity and sympathy too. This means trying to laugh with him from the other side of the threshold, rather than simply laughing at him. By the end of the recorded performance in Sydney I have been discussing Hamburger begins attacking the audience affectionately, which suggests that he thinks he has now developed some crowd sympathy. At 15:44 he refers to the audience as ‘assholes,’ and again at 17:14. The amused laughs of pleasure may mean anything from drunken oblivion to laughter at the buffoon-comedian who ‘abuses’ his audience to a more sympathetic recognition of the unseemliness of feeling like a despised ugly buffoon and a sympathetic recognition of the discomfort of laughing at ‘sick’ jokes. At 40:07 he asks ‘how many here are on cocaine, you sick creeps?’ At 41:23, he asks the crowd to ‘give yourselves a round of applause you sick narcissistic creeps.’ At 43:07 they are ‘sick perverts.’ Hamburger is trying to make them enter his world.

The attempt to create a more sympathetic laughter across the show is important because it is part of the emergence of Hamburger’s politics—a less visible moral vision evoking the emptiness of categories like celebrity and sacred. But how exactly does he create mutual sympathy with the lameness of his character? For one thing, he constantly links the lame ineptness of his character and setting with things that have the potential to be pitiable. For example, as he mentions his attempted suicide by jumping off a pile of bad reviews for his latest album, he mentions also that he is offering them for sale in a ‘mildewy corner’ even though they won’t sell (37:15–45). He also constantly whimpers in a high pitched whiney sounding voice after most of his jokes, both signaling his feelings about a tired pitiful career and constructing common we-are-not-amused ground with an audience that may have struggled to find a given joke amusing or only could because it is unseemly and funny when a comedian himself or herself is not even amused. Hamburger also offers his trademark phrase ‘but that’s my life!’ multiple times in this performance, though mostly in a trailing-off fashion suggesting he can barely even bring himself to complain. How much more unseemly is a comedian who is visibly troubled by his own act? This comic’s sympathy with the audience and the sympathy he asks in return is poignantly captured in a hilarious recognition (and construction) of mutual perversion towards the end of the show. Hamburger wishes to thank the crowd

for being such a good (sympathetic?) audience just before he finishes things off: that is, 'before we release the cyanide gas into the room' (41:05).

Hamburger's performance is structured as follows. There is a movement from jokes that attack merely conventional forms of unseemliness, via sick jokes and the ugly stage persona, culminating—not always, because that will depend on the audience—in the emergence of Hamburger's own sense of the unseemly, his own politics. Some of the jokes are harder to laugh at than others because they push toward that which is painful or viscerally disgusting. While such jokes can simply intensify the unseemliness of the character there is more going on than that.

Those who begin to inhabit the comic mind of Neil Hamburger on the other side of the social threshold, even a little, will have to maintain some subjective distance of their own from anything too threatening or painful, but even then, they are being asked to think about why the awkward jokes can stop amusement in its tracks. Why indeed are they still funny, if they are? Sympathizing with Hamburger means getting close to that uncomfortable threshold. It means dissolving the distance. Hamburger achieves this with jokes that can truly push the limit in contrast to his earlier jokes that might have been easier to find amusing. The implicit question that movement evokes is what the conditions are by which disgusting food, and the horrors drug addiction, murder, and dehumanization were kept at a comic distance before. When the distance dissolves and the threshold is reached, a fresh moral vision and thus a fresh sense of what is unseemly is exposed to view. To put it another way, Hamburger's underlying skepticism about the emptiness of the categories of celebrity and sacred emerges the more the audience is alienated from obvious forms of amusing unseemliness, pushed toward confusion, and made to ask the question of whether it is still possible to laugh. When an obvious unseemliness borders on the painful in a context that is *supposed* to be funny, the very difficulty of finding it funny begs the question of whether there is another unseemly target being aimed at. For example, comic distance is wound into the caricature of a God who could flippantly punish people with things like Domino's Pizza. Yet, when that caricature of God, and its comic distance from anything people might really believe in, is suddenly repositioned in the context of the poignant human tragedy of Terri Schiavo, the distance dissolves and the amusing caricature is qualified by the suffering of a real person. That suffering is almost made worse by the presence of the caricature.

The very idea that God could be flippantly responsible for the terrible suffering Schiavo and her family and then flippantly send her to hell for retributive punishment is itself horrific. The caricature of God using Domino's pizza for retribution was the initial target. Distance from the confronting idea of divine retribution comes from the unseemliness of 'creating' Domino's pizza to punish people and from the fact that a scenario in which those responsible for the holocaust were brought to some justice can be compelling. But the joke about Schiavo goes much further. The caricature of God is still the comic butt. However, it borders on the offensive or painful both for those who believe in a better God than that and for anyone who sees this as divine injustice. In trying to answer why one might still be laughing at such a joke, and whether they should be—while everyone else in the comedy club setting is laughing and the context makes laughter expected—the question arises as to what other unseemliness Hamburger may be attacking. Why wouldn't something else be going on when the jokes border on abusive non-jokes? When the sexual foibles of celebrities, such as Kevin Federline and Britney Spears, are suddenly made viscerally horrible by the dehumanizing idea of 'fucking' a caesarian section wound, the joke can only remain funny if it is reinterpreted as something not now so much about sexual unseemliness (and the moral idea that famous and influential people ought to be good role models) but more about the emptiness of fame and the intensity of our desire to make it meaningful when joking about the foibles of famous people. Casting celebrity jokes in sick terms, and groaning at them himself, Hamburger takes them to the very edge of their status as jokes, making a mockery even of the very act of joking about celebrities.

How does this work? Why is he doing it? There is a constant stream of television shows and magazines that mock celebrities. What is Hamburger doing that is different? Jokes about celebrities and jokes about God or deities tend to reinforce normative expectations. If we laugh at the silliness of sex-tape scandals and the drug-use of movie stars, it is, at one level, a reinforcement of the belief that stars and public figures ought to set a better example. At another level, such humour stems from the belief that celebrities ought not to suppose that people care about what they get up to just because they are famous. To laugh at what is unseemly in those instances is to *say* what is seemly. For Hamburger, however, that very seemliness is unseemly. The categories of celebrity and sacred as well as the moral beliefs that create expectations concerning them are utterly empty. Hamburger is deconstructing the many ways in which we keep these categories

meaningful by ordinary mockery of celebrities and gods. He makes a mockery of celebrity-joking both by gradually stripping celebrity jokes of their meaningfulness as a moral critique, recasting them as sick jokes and pushing the limits of people's comic distance. He makes a mockery of God-jokes too by shifting them from a light-hearted moral critique of a God-caricature into attack on a God-caricature that is little short of evil. Hamburger's mockery of celebrity jokes in particular is also achieved by embodying the emptiness of the category himself. He is a buffoon figure groaning at the 'failure' of his own career as a comedian. Of course, that is exactly where Hamburger's brilliance lies. The deflationary irreverence toward the very idea of celebrity and sacred as meaningful, when coming from an apparently bitter old comic who has never really been popular, is entirely, and often delightfully, in character.

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